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ABSTRACT

From the perspective of an African American woman teaching at an all-Black high school in the Mississippi Delta, the moment when she must begin teaching English grammar is the moment her students put up a fearful, sometimes hostile resistance. This paper examines the language patterns and attitudes of African Americans, as well as the educational methods used to teach African American students. Following an introduction which furnishes a historical background, the paper first discusses African Americans and the struggle for formal literacy and then discusses the development and perceptions of African American Vernacular English (AAVE). In the next section on continuing controversies about how to teach standard English, the paper focuses on teaching writing at the college level, noting that two assumptions at the heart of writing process methodology: a belief that students' expectations about learning do not substantially differ from those of their teachers and a belief that teachers are generally capable of understanding and exchanging dialogue with all students, can be inappropriate for Black students. The final section of the paper discusses "culturally engaged teaching" and gives various examples of effective use of that approach. Contains 70 references. (NKA)

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Between a Rock and a Hard Place: African Americans and Standard English

Introduction

> No full understanding of the issues associated with language and the education of African American children can be gained unless the history of the role and dynamics of language in the context of oppression is developed. (Hilliard 24)

In the early 1920s, two young Black women, both named Ola Mae, moved North from rural Georgia. One of them changed her name to Virginia and worked extremely hard to remove all traces of her down-home speech. It was not a "career move;" she, like my grandmother, the other Ola Mae, worked more than 50 years as a domestic for wealthy white families. As a child, I noticed that my grandma spoke in different ways--one way when she was around her white employers, and another way at home or at church. One day, I overheard my grandmother fussing at her old friend, saying, "I know you got to talk to them [white folks] like that, but why you talkin' that way to me?"

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I recall that conversation often in my classroom as I watch the same conflict torment another generation of African Americans. As an African American woman teaching at a rural all-Black high school in the Mississippi Delta, I enjoy a genuine fellowship with my students, many of whom I work with outside of school. Nevertheless, whenever I begin teaching grammar or usage, my students put up a fearful, sometimes hostile, resistance. Yet, in my class surveys and course evaluations, the students and their parents have consistently asked that I teach more grammar. At first, I tried to account for these contradictions with various excuses ("Grammar is just boring to them; I need to make it more interesting!"). Still, the tension and the fear were real. Looking back, I realize I shared their uneasiness with the topics but felt it was my duty to help them become proficient in "standard" usage. The truth is teaching English/language arts involves more complex questions and unresolved issues than many of us either realize or admit.

African Americans have survived the ravishing of our original languages and other aspects of our culture through creative resistance. Our home languages, now officially known as African American Vernacular English (AAVE)[1] , are a living testament to the perseverance of our foreparents as they passed on a significant amount of African culture, including language, in spite of the many attempts to erase it. On the other hand, we

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[1] AAVE is also referred to in various writings as Black English or Ebonics.

are constantly told that our language is a hindrance if we want to succeed. Like my grandmother and her friend, most Black Americans have had language use presented to us as a painful and false dichotomy. Sadly, even after the momentous work and debate among English/language arts professionals over the past 20-25 years, Black students and their teachers are still faced with the historical dilemma over language instruction.

My studies and my experiences have convinced me that we cannot ignore the impetus of history, yet an appalling number of professional educators working with Black children remain unnecessarily ignorant of basic facts about African Americans. Some still deny that African Americans practice a distinct cultural life with its own language patterns and moral values (Carter, 1994; R. Jones, qtd. in Asante 1991). Many of those who do recognize Black culture either denigrate it as a substandard imitation of "real" American culture or paternalize it as an exotic folkart. Both views grow from the racist assumptions and stereotypes undergirding the national consciousness. These same views and assumptions permeate the teaching profession, and more important, infest the educational and policy making structures of this nation.

Earlier, published debate about language arts instruction of African American students focused on the legitimacy of AAVE. Although very few educators openly challenge that idea anymore, it does not seem to matter in actual classroom practice. Whether they accept AAVE or not, English/language arts teachers are still

expected to produce students who can use standard English proficiently. Consequently, the current debate among educators reductively rages around "how best" to accomplish that task. Teachers, administrators, policy makers, and parents continue searching for the one foolproof technique or curriculum that will ensure African American students learn and use standard English.

Historically, diverse language uses within the American educational system "have been encouraged (or commanded) to give up the language of home and embrace the language of the school instead. Accompanying these exhortations are promises of social mobility and a better life, promises that often mock the reality of these students' daily experiences" (Moss and Walters 148). After the long struggle to obtain educational opportunities and break down the inequities of segregation, African Americans discovered that "schools have failed to make good on the promise that those literacy instructions [would] reward African American students socially and economically" (Fox 291). Hence, African American ambivalence toward standard American English (SAE) is a historically and politically created phenomenon. As Gilyard notes, "What has been commonly referred to by educators as 'failure' to learn standard English is more accurately termed an act of resistance: Black students affirming, through Black English, their sense of self in the face of a school system and society that deny the same" (164). My students could not articulate this point, but hundreds of years of collective experiences have produced an almost instinctive defense against

what SAE represents.

Cultural critic and teacher bell hooks[2] reminds us of the historical truth that "standard English is not the speech of exile. It is the language of conquest and domination" (168). I used to introduce grammar study by making an analogy between one's language usage and one's wardrobe, explaining that we sometimes needed to change our language as we would change outfits for appropriateness. Unfortunately, my analogy did not equip students to handle the psychological burden of these new linguistic clothes (Hilliard 1983). According to Moss and Walters, persons make conscious choices about language based upon the social associations they desire. "To ask or require individuals to change their language is to ask or require them to change their identity" (154). For speakers of African American Vernacular English, this "choice" means that changing the way we speak is not just about code-switching or simply translating from one dialect to another; it is also about surrender or seizure of cultural ground. As hooks suggests, African American culture includes among its characteristics resistance to and distinction from the dominating culture (171). Consequently, I have determined that language arts instruction among African American students must take into account the specific historical and cultural features of language use and abuse within and upon the African American community. My concern is that the preemptive

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[2]Critic and author Gloria Watkins uses the pseudonym bell hooks without capitalization.

dialogue over methodologies sidesteps some critical historical and social formulations impacting African American attitudes towards formal literacy. These attitudes have developed over an extended period of time, and educators at all levels cannot afford to ignore them if we are sincere about helping African American students reach their full potential as literate citizens.

African Americans and the Struggle for Formal Literacy

Black Americans are painfully aware and justifiably proud of our distinct traditions of education and literacy.

As Angela Davis notes, from the beginning, African Americans have had to fight for access to the dominant literacy:

> The mystifying powers of racism often emanate from its irrational, topsy-turvy logic. According to the prevailing ideology, Black people were allegedly incapable of intellectual advancement. After all, they had been chattel, naturally inferior as compared to the white epitomes of humankind. But if they really were biologically inferior, they would have manifested neither the desire nor the capability to acquire knowledge. Ergo, no prohibition of learning would have been necessary. In reality, of course, Black people had always exhibited a furious impatience as regards the acquisition

of education. (101)

The struggles over public education (i.e., the who and how of formal literacy) especially in the South, make up an important part of the historical context of language arts instruction. Contrary to popular belief, public education has not always existed in the U.S. and certainly has not always been an assumed right even of white citizens. The common school movement that began around 1830 swung precariously upon the same social conflicts that literally divided the nation: racism and economics. Originally, the common school movement had three goals:

[1] provide a free elementary education for every white child living in the U.S.;

[2] create a trained educational profession;

[3] establish state control over local schools (Church 55-56).

From the beginning, forces at all levels of American society have worked "to limit access of African Americans to literacy and to instill within them feelings of racial inferiority" (V. Harris 278). Even among those who considered themselves friends of the slaves, there was disagreement over whether Blacks deserved or desired formal education (V. Harris 1992; Davis 1983). As white politicians and abolitionist allies fretted over what to do with us, Black people were making our own decisions, which included maintaining our own schools, openly in the North and covertly in the South (Asante 1991; Davis 1983). After the Civil War, when

victorious Northerners "launched . . . an educational crusade . . . against the South" (Church 119), they found that many Blacks had not only already learned to read and write, but were also ahead of the new missionaries in their zeal to secure education's benefits fro themselves and their children (Church 129).

As the U.S. extended itself westward, early educational reformers also saw in the common school the only effective way to maintain and perpetuate the social values of the old colonial communities. "Common school reform was primarily an effort to reach down into the lower portions of the population and to teach children there to share the values, ideals, and controls held by the rest of society" (Church 79). Common schools provided a way to indoctrinate and control the growing population of immigrants and free Blacks. Thus, well-intentioned educational missionaries helped intensify and further complicate the cultural sequel to the War Between the States (as it is still known in the Deep South). Southern Whites, and more than a few Northern abolitionists, resisted the efforts to bring the children of former slaves to a status equal with their own. By the time the federal push for educational access began to fade into the Post-Reconstruction backlash, some Blacks had been able to achieve higher levels of learning. The system of separate and unequal public education, however, continued legally until Blacks were again able to rally enough progressive political support to dismantle it. Meanwhile, the vast majority of African Americans remained caught somewhere between illiteracy and a frustrating

taste of formal education. Many African Americans are familiar, first-hand, with this uglier side of the education system, and this bitter experience increases our ambivalence toward formal literacy even today.

Nevertheless, the cultural carryovers Black people sustained from Africa may very well have included our traditional attitudes about education. Holt explains it well:

> . . . African griots, the storytellers . . . and other elders . . . took responsibility for teaching young people. [That education] included the history, values, and traditions of the family, of the clan, and of the nation. Education was intended to provide the young with a sense of one's place in that history and, thus, one's purpose in the world; a sense of obligation to kin and community, to one's ancestors and posterity. (92)

Black schools and Black teachers, especially in the rural South, maintained these traditional hallmarks of African education. Although the segregated Black school suffered from lack of materials, space, and equipment, they relatively luxuriated in the control of their curriculum and teaching methods (relative, that is to many of today's Black schools both inner city and rural). Within the bosom of the community, young African Americans learned not only language arts, including impeccable

standard usage, but also the literature, stories, histories, ethics, songs, hopes, and expectations of our people as well as those of the nation at large. This is not to romanticize the degrading realities of segregation or to suggest that all the teachers and methods of the past were excellent. Nonetheless, it is widely believed in the Black community that desegregation and the corresponding loss of control over our children's education precipitated a cultural crisis responsible in part for the current social instability (Foster 1992). Fortunately, some Black schools and classrooms retain the cultural integrity of this earlier period from which we could learn much more about successful teaching of African American students.

The need to gather and analyze such pertinent research at the classroom level is made even more urgent by the disturbing shift in teacher demographics. A study by the Larkes (1995) confirms what government and media sources have already noted: that the pool of African American teachers is shrinking. The decreasing numbers of minority teachers relative to the increasing numbers of minority students only exacerbates the ongoing language conflict.

Giroux, paraphrasing Gramsci, suggests that teachers must take an active part in the struggle for creating the conditions necessary to make people literate, to give them a voice in both shaping and governing their society (2). One major grassroots effort by teachers to change literacy instruction in this country has been through the work of the National Writing Project. As a

young teacher and researcher, Lisa Delpit had been impressed with the Writing Project, but was concerned over the number of Black teachers who expressed deep dissatisfaction, even resentment, towards the Writing Project and its process-oriented philosophies. Her research revealed that many Black teachers had been prematurely silenced or excluded from the dialogue around writing instruction of Black children. This silencing of ethnic teachers, which is occurring simultaneously with the serious drop in the number of minority teachers overall, begins in the teacher education programs (Other 112). Failing to fully include the voices of minority and ethnic teachers in the professional dialogue over curriculum and teaching methods skews otherwise admirable research and reform efforts (Foster 1993). "The notion of intellectual provides a referent for criticizing those forms of management pedagogies, accountability schemes, and teacher-proof curricula that would define teachers merely as technicians. Moreover, it provides the theoretical and political basis for teachers to engage in a critical dialogue among themselves and others in order to fight for the conditions they need to reflect, read, share their work with others, and produce curriculum materials: (Giroux 25). Bell (1994) and others point out, most American educational practices, including language arts instruction, are based upon "Western behavioral science" and vary almost diametrically from the traditions and values of the Black community (48). Therefore, changing those practices will require greater inclusion of African American educators in

administrative, curricular, and educational policy decisions affecting Black students.

Development and Perceptions of African American Vernacular English

African Americans' consistent struggle for literacy has been heightened by the equally consistent dismissal of the differences between Black and white speech as the result of Black people's failure to learn "proper" usage. Prominent literary critic Cleanth Brooks offered a typical liberal apology for Black English:

> Pronunciations generally associated with African American speech (ie., 'dis' 'dat') originated among residents of Southern England (before "Standard English" had been settled upon) who later transported it to the Southern U.S. where it is commonly heard among Blacks and whites, including those highly educated . . . . Blacks, who were at first denied education, and later got only a rather poor and limited 'book learning' held on to what their ancestors had learned by ear and which had been passed on to them through oral tradition . . . [this] should free them from the charge that they corrupted and perverted the pronunciation of 'pure' English. (24)

Scholars, however, have verified the history and elements of Black English by tracing the roots of AAVE to the "new pigdins that were derived from a mixture of languages, with the Mande languages of West Africa and the Bantu languages of Central Africa, together with the Portuguese, French, Dutch, and English of the slave traders and slave holders substantially represented" (R. Howard 268). Black writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston was one of the first to document the cultural features which distinguish African American speech and expressive patterns from those of white Americans.[3] Her work during the period known as the Harlem Renaissance (1920s -30s) helped introduce the distinctive African American dialect with its own rules and norms. Hurston asserted that the Negro had "adorned" the English dialect of the South, listing among its contributions to the language: (1) The extensive use of metaphor and simile; (2) the use of the double descriptive (example, "low down" or "more better"), and (3) the use of verbal nouns (example, "funeralize" or "conversate") (Hurston 176). As bell hooks points out, these differences, even in the celebrated Negro spirituals, were often deliberate and served a political purpose:

> For in the incorrect usage of words, in the incorrect placement of words, was a spirit of rebellion that claimed language as a site of resistance. Using English in a way that ruptured standard usage and meaning, so that

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[3]See Appendix A

> white folks could often not understand Black speech, made English into more than the oppressor's language. (170)

In recent years, thoughtful academicians have admitted that the development of Black English and the preeminence of Standard American English (SAE) has had as much to do with the politics of race and class as with any legitimate linguistic phenomena.

Nevertheless, the debate over the place of AAVE and SAE in the curriculum continues. A recent letter to English Journal reflects the ongoing social conflict that language arts instruction of Black students generates. According to this teacher responding to an article on Black English by Geneva Smitherman:

> We are the keepers of the rules for English grammar, spelling, and pronunciation and students know it. The creation and perpetuation of their own dialect will not enhance their cover letters and resumes and will not impress their interviewers. For this they need to know the boundaries of etiquette in non-academic, professional environments, in extant formal communication . . . . It is the job of English teachers to prepare students to communicate with the world they are entering, not empower them to create new rules for the world. With due

> respect to Ms. Smitherman's contributions to language study, the standard American dialect, used in formal communication, is valid and dominant. Our priority, then, as public educators preparing citizens for society, should be to teach and support it. (Smith 12)

This logic is characteristic of many educators. However, a more accurate statement would be that SAE's "validity" lies in its political dominance because those who endorse it have the power to enforce that dominance. Conversely, AAVE is "invalid" not because there is anything inherently "wrong" with the dialect, but because we who speak it do not have the political power to insist that it be given respected status. Language is not neutral; neither is language study. Giroux sees a direct link between literacy (language and reading instruction) and one's philosophy on political empowerment. He outlines his disagreement with those who believe that the primary purpose of education is to spread "a privileged form of cultural capital" (i.e, SAE) among a broader spectrum of people and classes, even when that education takes into account the culture and experiences of the working class or minority students:

> In the United States, the language of literacy is almost exclusively linked to popular forms of liberal and right wing discourse that reduce it to either a

> functional perspective tied to narrowly conceived economic interests or to an ideology designed to initiate the poor, the underprivileged, and minorities into the logic of a unitary, dominant cultural tradition. (Giroux 3)

As taught in most classrooms, standard English (or "edited English" as Delpit calls it ("Conversation" 541)) is touted as America's lingua franca and, therefore, a significant key to social mobility. "To 'get on' in America, many middle class Blacks feel they must talk white. Many Blacks see Black English as a trap for their children" ("Black on White"). From the elementary school classroom to the graduate school, to the media or other corporate offices, African Americans are constantly aware that any time we slip back into the comfort of home language, we risk having our messages rejected or denigrated. As Patricia Collins points out, "Oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of the dominant group" (xiii). Attacks on Black people's "bad grammar" are often only slightly veiled attacks on our ideas, or even our presence. The generation of young African Americans who entered U.S. schools, universities, and work places on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement have found that access and accent alone could not break

glass ceilings or exorcise systematic racism. Changing our dialect is not some magic key to social mobility and educators should resist being used to perpetuate that myth.

"What has been largely ignored until recently is the fact that academic literacy is not universal but tied very closely to middle-class values and attitudes about language use" (Moss and Walters 157). What is now referred to as standard English is itself only one dialect of English with a particular class background (Smitherman 1983; Greenbaum 1990). It was the emerging capitalist class that required and organized the "regularizing and purifying" of English language for commercial purposes. "Linguistic models of correct speech," according to Smitherman, "were developed, based on Pax Romana, on the speech forms of the emerging capitalist ruling class elite, and on the . . . pronouncements and preferences of such grammarians" ("Language" 21). She goes on to demonstrate that while members of this elite group may themselves violate the grammatical rules they insist upon for others, their accepted speech never includes the normal diction or patterns of working class people. Fox (1992) argues that the acquisition of traditional academic literacy for most African Americans has meant having to give up our own culture and learn the trappings of another culture which still would not accept us. Indeed, as authors such as Stuckey (1991) and Fox (1992) point out, literacy education in many ways represents a continuation of the violence perpetrated against African Americans since our initial contact with this society.

Thus the key factor becomes not language, but the contextual use of that language. Richard L. Wright correctly asserts that language is not learned in a vacuum, but is part of the overall socialization of a person. Along with learning the vocabulary, rules, and norms of usage, a speaker from childhood also learns the social behaviors affiliated with a particular form of language. One who tries to learn the language later in its pure form, without the attendant social cues and mores, may still be at a social disadvantage. From this standpoint, he theorizes that Black and other ethnic children suffer academically not because they cannot master the language (standard English but because they have not been exposed to the socialization that goes with it in the white middle class society which judges them. The words we use or do not use, the way we use them, to whom and for what purposes are all highly charged political decisions which reflect our class orientation. In order to become proficient speakers of SAE, African Americans often consciously or unwittingly adopt concomitant mannerisms and attitudes which, if maintained too long or taken too seriously, could alienate us from our own communities. This latter point is not small matter in a culture that attaches great value to collectivism and communal responsibility.

Delpit cites additional research by Nelson-Barber among Puma Indian students learning English in the primary grades. "The researcher believes that by ages 8-9, these children became aware of their group membership and its importance to their well-being,

and this realization was reflected in their language. They may also have become increasingly aware of the school's negative attitude toward their community and found it necessary--through choice of linguistic form--to decide with which camp to identify" (Other 52). African American school children find themselves having to make a similar choice. In the minds of many writers, educators, and politicians, especially those who reduce diversity to a dismay over our country's shifting demographics, the major challenge of multicultural education is getting "those people" to use standard English (Moss and Walters 135). We are not held in low esteem because of our language; our language is held in low esteem because it is ours. African American students find their personal worth under attack by the very system that is supposed to protect and nurture them. Thus, for many Black students, language arts classrooms become battlegrounds rather than secure learning environments.

African American poet Haki Madhubuti defines writing as "a form of self-definition and communication through which writers basically define themselves and their relationship to the world" (174). But how do or can African American students define themselves within an educational environment and in a language form that are antithetical to their basic values and primary social identifications? Kim Hall summarizes the work of many Black scholars and writers who agree that the English language itself is charged with and perpetuates racism; therefore, language arts practitioners have to be particularly honest with

themselves and inform our students:

> By using this language [SAE] unconsciously or denying its racial effects, we support a system of thought that is terrifying in its complacency . . . acknowledging the power of that language and its material effects is a good place to address issues of race and do antiracist work. (266)

Continuing Controversies

As the foregoing discussion has documented, educators disagreements over how to teach standard English to certain dialect speakers grow out of larger unresolved socio-political conflicts. Too much of the professional debate has seemed to stall on the question of how Black dialect speakers could or should be taught to write proficiently in standard English. The deeper and more important questions, however, are not how do we teach SAE to African American students, but why, and will that knowledge, as well as our methods, genuinely empower the students and their communities?

There are those educators who think it desirable (but practically impossible) for most Black dialect speakers to become proficient in standard English. Similarly, there are those who think it is socially unacceptable to demand that Black dialect speakers become proficient in standard English. Although the latter group wishes to appear more sensitive and progressive, the classroom result is the same. Gilyard (1991) and Hartsell (1988)

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offer similar taxonomies of the most common methodologies related to teaching speakers of AAVE. In terms of classroom pedagogy, there appear to be two positions: a) SAE usage and conventions should be taught directly through rigorous drill and practice; b) SAE conventions should be taught indirectly through the context of revising and editing students' writing (Berthoff 1988; Graves 1991; K. Harris 1996; Hunter 1995; Noguchi 1991). Those who believe SAE should be taught to dialect speakers as a second language tend to do so through one of these two approaches.

Delpit refers to the research of Stephen Krashen on acquiring second language in which he describes what he calls an "affective filter," a mental block that inhibits acquisition of language skills. This block is more likely to occur "when the learner is exposed to constant correction" (Other 50). As many teachers can testify, students taught grammar using the more traditional direct methods often show little or no real increase in their use of standard English in speaking or writing. Many educators, therefore, advocate abandoning the "simplistic skills approach to writing, which for African American students has meant unnecessary concentration on the verb forms of standard English" (Fox 301).

Programs in most public schools aimed at helping "at-risk" students are based upon research from the compensatory education movement of the 60s and 70s. These programs are generally organized around several faulty premises including the views that "at-risk" students "have difficulty using standard English to

express feelings and ideas; and that [they] speak a restricted language that leaves them less able to handle abstractions and complex conceptualizations than middle-class students" (Hampton 187). Henry Louis Gates summarizes Hurston's argument that "people with extensive vocabularies have words for abstract ideas; those who do not, or who for reasons of circumstance cannot express themselves with that vocabulary, communicate with highly descriptive language . . . "(qtd. in Keeling 30). Hurston believed that unlike whites, Black people tend to think in "hieroglyphics" (175), and observation that is now corroborated by research on multiple intelligences and other studies. Smitherman argues that the initial research into Black dialect was motivated by the desire to determine where Black culture was deficient in relation to that of white America. "The logic of this response was premised on the assumption that if the Black socio-cultural environment were 'enriched,' Black energy would be channeled toward the goal of assimilation into America's mainstream" ("Language" 15). Unfortunately, when working with African American students, many educators still equate difference with deficiency (Newell 2; Bowie 1992).

Failing or refusing to take historical and political context into account, some researchers persist in a hunt for defects in Black students. Sondra Graham reviewed approximately 140 studies on the topic of motivating African American students and came to the more accurate determination that "African Americans appear to maintain a belief in personal control, have high expectations,

and enjoy positive self-regard" (55). These are all traits of high achievers, and their consistent appearance among African American students contradicts popular notions that the majority of Black students exhibit "at-risk" behaviors such as low self-esteem. In fact, "Black subjects maintain undaunted optimism and positive self-regard even in the face of achievement failure" (Graham 103).

Epps compares the failure of American education to help Black children become truly literate to a wholesale massacre:

> On the one hand, the American educational system has been proficient in teaching Black Americans to be functionally literate . . . On the other hand, they are not literate enough to seize the power of the written word and thus change the course of their destiny" (154).

This miseducation process continues at the college level as "Black and poor youth are ushered into remedial writing programs where they themselves comes to believe that they have no ideas worth expressing and that grammar exercises will lead magically to success in life" (Epps 156).

A widely held view that "learning proceeds from simple to complex, from concrete to abstract has resulted in content being broken into a fixed sequence of discrete skills, beginning with the simplest (the basics) and moving toward the more complex (higher-order) skills" (Hampton 191). According to Hampton's

studies, "even apparently elementary kinds of learning entail complex intellectual activity of the sort that is often labeled 'higher order' thinking. Consequently, there is no basis for believing that learning proceeds from so-called lower-level activities that require no independent thinking or judgement to higher level ones that do. Further, there is no validity in drilling on the 'basics' before engaging students in thinking and problem solving" (Hampton 192). However, because speakers of AAVE appear to need what Delpit calls "direct instruction" in grammar rules, for example, in order to make the conscious translations to standard English, they are perceived as being low-level achievers. Delpit recounts first-hand observations she has made of Black children being misunderstood by their teachers and of teachers' low expectations for students where those expectations were not deserved. She draws an important connection between these observations and the generally negative pictures of Black youths in popular media (Other xv).

In recent decades, a few researchers have examined how educational institutions respond to diversity, particularly within writing classes. They argue that educators must change the way we view students from diverse groups and be prepared to replace standard conventions and stereotypes with more accurate information about the skills, potentials, and particulars of students who are different from ourselves. As Moss and Walters put it:

> At least since earlier this century when

> large scale standardized examinations began to play a major role in American education, schools and universities in this country have operated largely as if diversity did not matter. Despite what a great deal of scholarly research has revealed and what our common sense teaches us, we as teachers often continue to evaluate ourselves and our students as if there were a single, appropriate way of using language and of being literate in this culture. (133)

Of particular interest is the movement in composition towards teaching grammatical conventions inductively through the use of what has come to be called "process" methods. "Process teaching" is generally defined as "an approach to literacy that focuses on fluency, student ownership of their writing, and teachers who will assist rather than orchestrate, development. In theory, students will be actively engaged by caring teachers who will understand them and put them to write frequently about meaningful topics. In practice, some African American students are often distanced from class structures and either explicitly or complicity disengage" (Siddle, "Asleep" 321). According to Siddle, two assumptions "are at the heart of writing process methodology:

1. A belief that students' expectations about learning do not substantially differ from those of their teachers;

2. A belief that teachers are generally capable of understanding, viewing positively, and exchanging dialogue with all students" (Siddle, "Asleep" 323).

These assumptions, weak at best when applied to students generally, are dangerously faulty when applied by teachers of one cultural/class background to students from different ones. Many Black educators have questioned whether these general definitions and approaches are necessarily appropriate for all learners. As Delpit points out, "There's an assumption . . . that everybody will develop to be a more sophisticated writer by following essentially the same process approaches" ("Conversations" 543),

Unfortunately, a standardized "one-size-fits-all" use of process methods can be just as damaging and ineffective for African American students as exclusive use of traditional drill approaches unless more specific student needs are considered. As Delpit argues, "Writing process advocates often give the impression that they view the direct teaching of skills to be restrictive to the writing process at best, and at worst, politically repressive to students already oppressed by a racist educational system. Black teachers, on the other hand, see the teaching of skills to be essential to their students' survival" ("Skills" 383). Siddle examines the reactions of African American students to teachers, particularly white teachers, who use process teaching methodology exclusively and finds significant cultural gaps. She argues that a "subjective relationship . . . exists between teachers and students and is

influenced by, but not limited to, methods of instruction" ("Falling Asleep" 322). Delpit (1988) and Siddle (1989) both found that "Black students and their parents tend to dislike and distrust teachers who rely too heavily on student-centered approaches because they believe the teacher is either incompetent or deliberately withholding information and setting the children up to fail" (Delpit, "Silenced" 287-288). The problem with most process oriented teaching methods is they "create situations in which students ultimately find themselves held accountable for knowing a set of rules about which no one has ever directly informed them" (Delpit, "Silenced" 287).

Similarly, Delpit adds, "I have come to conclude that members of any culture transmit information implicitly to co-members. However, when implicit codes are attempted across cultures, communication frequently breaks down . . . . In literacy instruction, explicitness might be equated with direct instruction" ("Silenced" 283-284). Anglo-European culture places higher priority on the "rationalized" or analytical approach to problem solving. Analytical learners "prefer to work independently of others in learning situations that are abstract and impersonal rather than socially focused" (51). Bell contrasts this to the "relational learning style" research identifies as being most common among African American students. Relational learners prefer "learning content that addresses social issues as opposed to abstract or socially neutral content" (51). The relational style, however, has been defined in

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behavioral theory as a deficient model. By correlation, therefore, African American learners who favor the relational style are also considered deficient.

This tendency to blame students for the lack of success with certain instructional techniques has had devastating consequences for too many children of color. Ironically, educators trying to make their classrooms more effective and democratic through the use of less directive instructional approaches may be just as dogmatic in the application of these approaches as those using the more traditional lecture-style approaches:

> Some teachers conclude that if a student has problems with the whole language [another indirect methodology], there must be something wrong with the student. Such thinking may increase referrals to special education or tutoring services. Kronick noted that constructivism (yet another term for teaching usage and mechanics inductively) may lure some teachers into believing that individual differences are neither real nor even problematic and that difficulties will resolve themselves in due developmental time. (K. Harris 28)

On the other hand, Dandy (1991), for example, believes a whole language approach to language arts instruction is beneficial to Black children and that it can be compatible with Afrocentric

teaching models. Many Black teachers who embrace process methods do so because they also see a similarity between those methods and the instructional and rhetorical practices of effective Black teachers and preachers. Likewise, some who resist the methods do so because they view these new approaches as a "white thing" being imposed upon them by an educational elite.

Beyond Methodology: Culturally Engaged Teaching

Petroskey encountered this debate over methodology during a 1988 study of literacy and schools here in the Mississippi Delta region in which he focused on teachers and students at two traditionally Black high schools. He was curious about the remarkable success rate of these students on the new state mandated test (Functional Literacy Exam) as compared to other students (Black and white) around the state. By all statistical measures, the students in these two districts were "at-risk," yet they consistently performed well on standardized tests and had high graduation and college attendance rates. Students from these schools mastered SAE and went on to become successful college students. It surprised Petroskey that most of the teachers at these two school (the majority of whom were Black) relied heavily on a "call-and-response" type of classroom recitation.

A former student of a segregated Black high school "recalled the stringency of the graduation requirements. Students had to be proficient in public speaking, writing, and communication before they could graduate. They had to memorize and recite 100 literary

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selections from traditional Western classics and significant words by Black writers that represented human struggles, worth, dignity, and victory" (Nix 438). Remembering the Black schools of her childhood, hooks observes:

> Teachers worked with and for us to ensure that we would fulfill our intellectual destiny and by so doing uplift the race. My teachers were on a mission. To fulfill that mission, my teachers made sure they 'knew' us. They knew our parents, our economic status, where we worshipped, what our homes were like, and how we were treated in the family . . . . Attending school then was sheer joy. (2-3)

These schools continued the traditions of the Black community toward education referred to earlier. To her joyous early educational experiences, hooks contrasts her crushing encounter with education in the desegregated school:

> School changed utterly with racial integration. Gone was the messianic zeal to transform our minds and beings that had characterized teachers and their pedagogical practices in our all-Black schools. Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived or behaved. It was no longer connected to antiracist

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> struggle. Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience and not a zealous will to learn was what was expected from us. Too much eagerness to learn could easily be seen as a threat to white authority. When we entered racist, desegregated which schools we left a world where teachers believed that to educate Black children rightly would require a political commitment. (3)

Michele Foster's important studies of exemplary Black teachers supports the experiences of hooks and many other African Americans. She reports that:

> These teachers share the perspective that the effective teaching of African American students involves more than merely imparting subject matter. They reason that African American teachers' ability to talk with African American students in terms they understand about the personal value, collective power, and political consequences of choosing academic achievement has been sharply curtailed by desegregation. As a result, they contend that not only has desegregation weakened their solidarity with Black students, but it has also limited their ability to engage in critical dialogue with

> African American students, dialogue necessary to engage students in their own learning. ("Politics" 190)

Numerous other studies (Haynes 1992; Graves 1991; Fox 1992; Petroskey 1990; Menken 1994; Campbell 1994; Ladson-Billings 1989 and 1992) describe examples of various methodologies being used successfully to teach SAE to African American students in various settings. Delpit suggests that "direct instruction of certain kinds of strategies" in addition to process approaches, "would also help children acquire the culture of power" ("Conversation" 541). Nembhard (1983) describes the writing program at Howard University and outlines eight points which she says contribute to its success and that of any effective writing program for Black dialect speakers including a variety of teaching approaches, respect for student dialects, and open discussion of those dialects as they relate to SAE in the school and society. Levine suggests that educational approaches which have proven successful with students from low-income backgrounds were often accompanied by other major changes including: "large scale continuing staff development efforts; considerable technical assistance; . . . improvements in school climate, leadership, expectations for students . . . "(1). Celebrated African American teacher Marva Collins, at her Westside Prep School in Chicago, combines a very structured program of phonics and classical Western literature with rhetorical styles used in the African American community (Hollins and Mitchell cited in Foster, "Sociolinguistics" 306).

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In addition, many Black educators and researchers have pushed for and used Afrocentric contents and context as a key to increasing the potential for achievement among African American students (Asante 1991). Marva Collins remembers that as she began her teaching career in the segregated schools of rural Alabama:

> I didn't know anything about educational theory, and I have often thought that worked in my favor. Without preconceived ideas and not bound by rules, I was forced to deal with my students as individuals, to talk to them, listen to them, find out their needs. I wasn't trying to see how they fit into any learning patterns or educational models. I followed my instincts and taught according to what felt right. (47)

Finally, I should note, some Black language arts teachers are not as successful with their African American students as are some white teachers whose relationship with their students is knowledgeable and respectful. A group of English teachers affiliated with the Bread Loaf School of English, for example, conducted action-research in their own classrooms to examine the effectiveness of writing instruction conducted by all-white faculty with African American students, particularly the males. These teachers found, as others have, that action research and ethnography are especially fruitful methods of analyzing their own work and generating ideas for how to do that work more

effectively (Carson 1991; Krater 1994; Walters 1984). "I believe the actual practice of good teachers of all colors typically incorporates a range of pedagogical orientations" (Delpit, "Silenced" 282). All these examples and suggestions for culturally effective language arts instruction depend upon a teacher's ability and willingness to learn and respect the literacy accomplishments, needs, and potentials of a specific group of students.

This classroom phenomena that Nix, Petroskey, and other researcher struggle to describe is what I call "culturally engaged instruction." Successful Black teachers in the former segregated schools provided literacy instruction as part of a social and cultural network that was supportive and symbiotic. This suggests that the success (or failure) of particular teaching methods has more to do with the cultural and political factors involved than with any particular pedagogical formula. The question is not whether Black students can master SAE, but rather whether they will be offered the opportunity to do so on culturally acceptable terms. As Gilyard puts it, "A pedagogy is successful only if it makes knowledge or skill achievable while at the same time allowing students to maintain their own sense of identity" (11).

Paying attention to those factors, as Foster ("Sociolinguistics" 1992) and others warn, calls for a recognition that successful classroom strategies must be locally developed and not indiscriminately copied from other communities

or classrooms. Educational policy makers, researchers, administrators, and teachers must resist the convenience of trying to enforce a false and debilitating uniformity in curriculum or in methodology:

> If teachers are going to become reflective practitioners, they need to possess both theoretical and practical knowledge of how to use cultural, linguistic, and sociolinguistic information to develop ways of teaching that not only respect cultural diversity but insure high levels of literacy. (Foster 308)

Brooks and Scott (1985), among others, have also pointed out that effective teaching of African American students grows out of a very rich and specific classroom knowledge.

I realize that many of the issues I have addressed here are not exclusive to African Americans but also effect other groups. That realization makes further dialogue on these issues all the more imperative. Successful teaching of language arts with African American students, as with all students, begins and grows from a respectful knowledge base of the student as individual and as part of a larger historical and social network. Teachers' inability or unwillingness to acquire this base knowledge can often be traced to omissions in the teacher education programs. How our society trains teachers and how we develop classroom level curriculum has to be radically challenged to give teachers the professional confidence and flexibility to teach students,

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not just content. The art of teaching involves not only the dispensing of facts and terminology, but also the learning of cultures, needs, and perspectives which may not match our own. My goal as an English teacher is to help my students become more effective communicators in various mediums (speaking, writing, listening, and reading). Effective communicators are able to process signals, information, or ideas critically. They can understand and determine the meaning of texts and subtexts they receive, and they can develop, organize, frame, and send their ideas to audiences within their communities and in the larger society in such a way that those ideas can be both understood and respectfully considered. Therefore, language arts instruction must, by its nature, be empowering. Empowering language arts instruction is a dynamic practice shaped by informed and collaborative analysis of the particular cultural experiences, strengths, and learning goals of a specific group of students within a particular community.

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